DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 393 UD 016 216

AUTHOR Chan, Carole
TITLE The Chinese American: Inscrutable to Some.
INSTITUTION Los Angeles County Commission on Human Rights, Calif.
PUB DATE May 75
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Asian Americans; Chinese; *Chinese Americans; *Chinese Culture; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Environment; Cultural Factors; Cultural Images; *Cultural Interrelationships; *Cultural Pluralism; Culture Conflict; Culture Contact; Ethnic Groups; Labeling (of Persons); *Minority Groups; Sociocultural Patterns; Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Chinese Americans have been called inscrutable--not open to being understood. More casual, spontaneous, and expressive people find it hard to understand the strict discipline of feelings and highly selective and controlled expressions such as the Chinese American may practice. This paper serves as a social introduction to the Chinese American. For brevity's sake, the term "Chinese American" is used in referring to Americans of Chinese ancestry and the term "Chinese" when referring to that cultural heritage or self identification. Among the issues that are addressed are the following: Chinatown, three Chinese American approaches to life (traditional, marginal, activist) and the cultural practices most often retained by the Chinese (foods, language, symbols, celebrations and observances, religion, extended family bonds, personal and family pride, and perseverance). The Chinese American is no foreigner, as Chinese have been in Southern California for over a hundred years. Immigration was cut off from 1882 to 1943, and between 1943 and 1965 only 105 Chinese were allowed to enter the U.S. each year. In 1965, the strict quota was relaxed to match that of other countries. The ratio of foreign born to native born is now increasing. The stereotypes associated with the Chinese American--that of they "have it made", and "they are all alike"--are refuted. (Author/AM)

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THE CHINESE AMERICAN
INSCRUTABLE TO SOME

The Chinese American* is not simply a Chinese person who lives in this country. He is separated from the Chinese of China by his experience as a member of an American minority. This history of the Chinese American – what has gone into his making – is just now beginning to be recognized and appreciated.

The term "Chinese American" may be applied to the recent immigrant or to the person whose great great great grandfather was an immigrant. In between these extremes are the Americans of Chinese ancestry whom the reader is most likely to meet.

This paper is intended to be rather like a social introduction – to provide a beginning. What follows that introduction is largely up to the reader. It can be exploration and discovery of ways in which you and Chinese American individuals are alike or different, in agreement or disagreement, potentially cooperative or conflicting. Whether or not a person chooses to interact with another and how he will interact should grow out of such knowledge.

*For brevity we have used the term "Chinese American" in referring to Americans of Chinese ancestry and the term "Chinese" when referring to that cultural heritage or (self) identification.

THE CHINESE AMERICAN IS NO FOREIGNER

In order to manage life here, newly arrived Chinese *immigrants* must become "Americanized" to some degree. In contrast, the Chinese you are most likely to meet have not made and never will make that change – they were *born* Chinese *American*. English is their native tongue and American is their native culture. They can no more be "Americanized" than a native of Los Angeles can be "urbanized."

Chinese Americans may choose and retain Chinese ways and things to enrich their lives just as city dwellers may choose gardening, country music, or horseback riding to enrich theirs.

On a deeper level the Chinese Americans may retain Chinese values, attitudes and manners in the way that city dwellers may reflect the rural orientation of their parents or grandparents. For instance, to the completely urban person, trees, plants and flowers suggest wealth and leisure, while the country person takes them as a matter of course. The small-town person quite naturally greets strangers, while the city-dweller automatically locks doors.

Most Americans do not know or do not remember that Chinese have been in Southern California for over a hundred years. There are third, fourth and later generations of Chinese Americans who retain only those parts of the Chinese culture which they have made a very conscious effort to retain.

IMMIGRATION WAS CUT OFF

From 1882 to 1943 American law prohibited the entry of Chinese except for staffs of officials; certain students, teachers, traders and travellers; children of citizens and also grandchildren under certain circumstances. The same law made Chinese ineligible for naturalized citizenship. It was the first time this country restricted immigration of an entire ethnic group by law.

Destruction of birth records in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 enabled many Chinese to claim U.S. citizenship. As

citizens they were eligible to bring their children into the country. It became common practice to report the birth of a child (usually a son) after each trip to China. A relative or friend, or a stranger willing to buy the immigration papers could enter the United States as this "paper son." Many Chinese Americans avoid contacts with governments for fear that "paper fathers" and "paper sons" will be exposed and deported.

NOW THERE ARE NEWCOMERS

Between 1943 and 1965 only 105 Chinese (outside of special exempted categories) were allowed to enter this country each year. In 1965 the strict quota was relaxed to match that of other countries. The ratio of foreign-born to native-born is now increasing.

Many of these newcomers have English language skills. They rather quickly join Chinese-American residential clusters such as those in the Crenshaw/Exposition area, Monterey Park, South Pasadena, Torrance and parts of Orange County.

But for those without English language skills, the hopes for a better life in Gold Mountain (as America is called in the Chinese language), may all but die in the Chinatown-area. To venture beyond Chinatown into the metropolis is an act of will and nerve if you speak no English.

Most non-English speaking Chinese must make do with the housing, jobs, food and other products available within walking distance of Chinatown, or those which can be reached by memorized bus routes. The housing is poor and/or expensive, jobs are scarce and often pitifully low-paying. These factors combine to exhaust time and energy and hope.

CHINATOWN

Although Chinatown now serves as a shelter from language problems, this (shared language) was only one of the reasons for its creation.

At first, in spite of language and cultural differences, the Chinese mixed uneventfully with the rest of the population. Co-existence however, became difficult, and then nearly impossible as the number of Chinese grew and their role in the economy changed. At the time of struggle between workers and employers, while the labor movement was organizing, Chinese workers were often used as strike-breakers. Since most Chinese laborers were in the employ of big business (e.g. railroads and farming giants), they were called the tools of big business and suffered the consequences. Then, as some Chinese began to start businesses of their own, the competition and hostility became more direct. In the depressed economy of the 1870's this minority had the misfortune of being a highly visible and vulnerable threat, a race to be feared and hated.

In the face of widespread discrimination and persecution, the Chinese drew together for safety and mutual support; they established Chinatowns.

In time, Chinatown became a tourist attraction. It also became a model ghetto – keeping its troubles to itself. Chinese white collar workers, businessmen and professionals who came out of Chinatowns at great human cost and pain were pointed out as a "successful minority."

THE CHINESE AMERICAN DOESN'T "HAVE IT MADE"

The "success" of the Chinese American is not what it appears to be. The Chinese American population in the Los Angeles County has a higher number of years schooling (median) than the white population.* There are more Chinese American adult males (median) in "professional, technical and kindred." and "management administrative, excepting farming" jobs than there are in the white population.* Since these two job categories are generally higher paying, and tend to offer the most opportunity for advancement and job security, we might expect these differences in education and employment to be

* *U. S. Census, 1970*

reflected in higher income. Yet the Chinese have a *lower* median family income than the white population.* The awareness of being on the outside is reflected in the use of the term "American" by Chinese to mean "white."

THEY AREN'T ALL ALIKE

Concerning any of the minorities, the advice can not be overstated: expect diversity. A woman wearing the cheongsam (mandarin-collared sheath with side-slit skirt), may speak the King's English as taught in Hong Kong private schools, or she may speak no English at all. A young man in faded jeans with long hair may speak English with a heavy Chinese accent, or he may speak American slang that defies middle-aged decoding. Chinese Americans are also diverse in the Chinese they speak. Although the national language of Chinese is Mandarin (originally from northern China), the dialect most used here is Cantonese (the principal dialect of a province in southern China). To further complicate the picture, there are also regional dialects and village dialects. Mandarin and Cantonese are so distinct that they may as well be entirely different spoken languages, and some local dialects are equally unintelligible to all but the locals. The written language, however, is common to all.

The best way to open communications is to speak to the individual. The 34%* of the 41,500* Chinese Americans in Los Angeles County who are California-born are understandably put off when complimented on how well they speak English. The 51% who are foreign-born, even those who have lived here most of their lives, may be perplexed to hear that you think they're "right on."

POSITIVE PREJUDGMENTS ARE DAMAGING, TOO

There is some truth in commonly held assumptions about Chinese Americans – that they are responsible, industrious, scholarly, quiet, frugal, modest, and family-oriented. They will, and do, kid

* *U. S. Census, 1970*

among themselves about the things which are "typically Chinese"; but more and more the younger people are insisting on the right to be individuals. Any assumptions and prejudgments deny that right and are destructive. Both positive stereotypes and negative stereotypes are wrong. They stifle and constrict. A positive stereotype is like the burden of having not just one, but 10,000 big brothers who were honor students.

THREE CHINESE AMERICAN APPROACHES TO LIFE

The **traditional** approach is exemplified by those who accepted whatever work was available, however menial, and miraculously produced a college-trained second generation. These include the Chinatown waiters who are too busy with the work of survival to learn much English. Some are professionals who have been cut off from their real vocations by the language barrier. Another example is the immigrant woman who never before worked outside the home, but who has picked up skills in Chinatown sewing factories to help meet family expenses.

This approach in life tends to be cautious and conservative, ruled by a high sense of duty to families and extended families.

An important part of this approach is the focus on personal bonds such as marriage and blood ties, rather than commitment to causes. The same discrimination and persecution which contributed to the creation of Chinatown also caused Chinese Americans to avoid public notice and to devote their energies to primary needs in the family.

The traditional style is not limited to the immigrant generation nor to lower socio-economic classes. Some recent immigrants are activists and some upper middle class professionals are as traditional as their parents and grandparents.

The person with **marginal** identification is not really at home either in the Chinese American subculture or in the American world. He is very conscious of the differences that separate him from the

more traditional person. At the same time he sees himself (and is often treated) as a fringe member of the American community. But, very gradually, changes are being made. Marginal Chinese Americans now participate in activities which have specific impact on fundamental Chinese values (e.g. professional organizations or school support groups). Even this is a departure from their traditional upbringing. Some will now actively support, for instance, opposition to a new thoroughfare that would cut into the schoolyard. Chinese Americans are becoming more involved in the wider community.

The Chinese American **activist,** willing to engage in active conflict over issues and to insist on his rights, is not always a thoroughly American youth. The activist may also be a recent immigrant who has experienced effective group action and who does not feel or act like a member of a minority. The history of discrimination and persecution that made many Chinese Americans hesitant to speak up does not exist for this new American.

CULTURAL PRACTICES MOST OFTEN RETAINED BY THE CHINESE

Foods come to mind first. About the safest generalization one could make is that Chinese Americans enjoy Chinese food and they use chopsticks to eat it, even those who eat it only in restaurants when a Chinese-speaking relative or friend is there to order "the real thing." Chopsticks and the big cleaver are standard furnishings in most Chinese homes, even those where the closest thing to ethnic cuisine is the use of soy sauce in the gravy.

Many Chinese American families routinely have rice rather than bread or potatoes with dinner; some have simplified Chinese menus (just one vegetable dish and one meat dish, instead of many).

Language, as we have said, is varied. It is not uncommon for immigrant parents to speak Chinese to their children and be answered in English. Both may have a listening knowledge (or lucky guesses) of the other language. One young Chinese American woman complains that when she tries to practice her Chinese on her mother, her mother refuses to help – she (the mother) wants to practice understanding and speaking English.

Many Chinese Americans have Chinese **names**. Some of the names lend themselves to translation, such as "Moonbeam" or "Jade Snow." Others are seldom-used words which are more difficult to translate. Rather than actually translate the Chinese name, parents sometimes select American names which are phonetically similar to the Chinese names. Eileen may be Oi lin; Wilbert, Wah But. In the homes with third generation parents, children may barely remember the Chinese names their grandparents gave them, badly mispronounce them, and be unable to recognize them in writing. Early in this century, the reverse was more likely to be true. A little immigrant girl who had been given an American name by her (segregated Chinatown) public school teacher would stop in the middle of play to ask her friend, "Effie, Effie, what's my American name?" It was important for her to learn her American name – it would be a part of her future. To that little girl and many who followed her, their Chinese names were essential. To lack a Chinese name was to lack identity, to be a non-entity. To today's child, a Chinese name may be no more than an interesting "extra," a tie with the past.

Many Chinese Americans have had their names reversed by unknowing American immigration officials, teachers, and Americans in general. Mr. Chan Dy Hoy (surname Chan) was called Mr. Hoy. His children and grandchildren are Hoys. They are understood by the Chinese, though, to really be Chans.

For those persons who have a hard time telling Chinese from other Asians, a good clue is the family name. Only a very few Chinese surnames (Soo Hoo, for instance) have as many as two syllables.

The more traditional Chinese a person's orientation, the more important **symbols** are likely to be. For example, the approach to a home and the view from the front door can portend an open way, obstructions, or a bad outlook. And the first item carried into a new home should be something of culture, perhaps a vase, or a carved table – surely not a box of dirty clothes. Odd numbers are bad luck; even numbers, good. Until recently, it was wrong to wear a dark blue or black dress to a party or wedding. Those were mourning colors.

Celebrations and observances retain bicultural elements. Chinese

and "American" New Years Days, births, marriages and funerals usually include observance of some Chinese customs. For those families able to afford it, 51st, 61st, 71st, 81st, 91st, etc. birthdays are elaborately celebrated, sometimes with hundreds of guests at a great banquet. Almost all Chinese Americans of all generations are familiar with money gifts wrapped in red paper for good luck. These may be token gifts of coins or larger sums; they are given by married adults, usually to younger unmarried friends and relatives.

If the Chinese Americans you meet identify with a **religion,** it is most likely Christian. There are about three dozen Chinese Christian congregations in this region. Those of the major denominations, mostly located in central Los Angeles, serve as gathering centers for members living as far away as Long Beach or Fullerton. Overlapping these religious preferences, the Confucian teachings continue to be fundamental; courtesy, faithfulness, thrift, upholding of honor and, above all, filial piety, respect for and devotion to elders. When a Chinese person, speaking Chinese, addresses his uncle, the listener knows by the word for "uncle" which he uses, whether that man is a maternal or paternal uncle, whether he is related by blood or by marriage, and whether a paternal uncle is older or younger than the speaker's father. Each person, according to the Chinese scheme, has responsibilities and privileges fitting his place. The younger or subordinate must respect (and therefore comply with) the will of the elder or superior.

On the other hand, it is interesting to see that certain male cousins are called "brother" in Chinese, and certain female cousins are "sister." Here the language expresses the **extended family bonds.** Family bonds, though they are relaxing among the native born, are still relatively strong. For instance, 91% of Chinese Americans under 18 years of age in Los Angeles County live with both parents compared to 78% of those populations as a whole.*

* *U. S. Census, 1970*

Personal and family **pride, called "face,"** continues to influence traditional and marginal Chinese Americans. Embarrassment is not taken lightly -- it is only one step from shame, and shame reflects on the entire family and extended family. "Face" has been given as the reason for restraint, caution, avoiding risks. The Chinese proverbs kept alive in America run more in the vein of "better safe than sorry," not "easy come, easy go." Caution was essential to people who at one time were, by law, prohibited from testifying in court for or against any white person. The Chinese American learned that fostering some elements of his Chinese heritage, generally passive elements, increased his chances of survival. Other, more active philosophies, if practiced, would result in violent humiliation. Sadly, pride and wariness prevent many Chinese Americans from using government programs to which they are entitled -- even social security benefits. It is very difficult for them to ask assistance and to answer personal questions; and questioning may uncover family immigration secrets.

The ordered way of life results in more **formality** than Westerners are used to. The most respectful names ("Dr. Low, Miss Kwok") are used unless the person addressed asks you to use a less formal name. It would be presumptious to do otherwise. Formality inhibits **physical expressions**, too, such as hugging or kissing in greeting. It is only the most American Chinese person who feels at home with such greetings. Just as much kissing on the lips in greeting is said to be "Hollywood," touching in public (to the Chinese) is "American." Subdued expressions by Chinese Americans, however should not be taken to mean the absence of emotions.

Perseverence has been costly. The Chinese American has survived legislated discrimination (being denied naturalized citizenship and being singled out for taxing as a "foreign" miner). He has survived mob violence such as the Los Angeles massacre of 19 Chinese in 1871 and similar incidents in other Chinatowns of the Pacific states. He is surviving more and less subtle continuing discrimination and misunderstanding. The "Chinaman" was considered subhuman, he was a "yellow peril." To be given "not a Chinaman's chance" was to be as good as dead. The word "Chinaman" has become offensive to Americans of Chinese ancestry.

ARE THEY INSCRUTABLE?

Chinese Americans have been called inscrutable – not open to being easily understood. More casual, spontaneous, and expressive people find it hard to understand strict discipline of feelings and highly selective and controlled expressions such as the Chinese American may practice.

Understanding the Chinese American will come most easily to those who respect differences:

Differences between the Chinese Americans and other Americans.

Differences among Americans of Chinese ancestry.

This booklet is provided as an educational service by:

The Los Angeles County
Commission on Human Relations
320 West Temple Street, No. 1184
Los Angeles, California 90012
(213) 974–7611

Text prepared by:

Carole Chan
Staff Consultant

The Commission is grateful to the following persons who reviewed this paper and offered their comments and suggestions:

Jean Chu, Oriental Service Center
Aileen Chan Hoy
Laurie Kwok
Mark Lai, lecturer on Chinese American History,
San Francisco State College
Anthony Lo
Paul Louie
Judy Miller
Dr. Allan Seid, Chairman, Santa Clara County
Human Relations Commission

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